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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [MCAP](#) [MARR](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ACTING ARMY COMMANDER MASRI PUTS ATTACK
HELOS AT TOP OF LIST

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In an August 29 meeting with a visiting DOD delegation, a confident and open Acting Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Masri explained the Army's most pressing needs, chief among them attack helicopters. Masri explained that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would remain in support of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) during the 2009 elections, but that he expected the LAF to play a large supporting role. Masri informed the delegation that many countries are courting the LAF with offers of security assistance, but that the LAF is rebuffing their efforts, preferring to stay with the U.S. as its primary supplier. End Summary.

2. (SBU) During a one-day visit to Lebanon on August 27, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OSDP-ISA) Mary Beth Long and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities (OSDP-SOLICIC) Michael Vickers met with Lebanese Minister Acting Army Commander Shawki Al-Masri at Lebanese Armed Forces Headquarters in Yarze. Long and Vickers were accompanied by Major General Robert Allardice, CENTCOM J-5; Colonel Dave Huggins, ARCENT Commander Representative; Colonel Tom Henwood, ASD Long's Military Assistant; Lieutenant Colonel Bob Paddock, CENTCOM Lebanon Desk Officer; Commander Wyman Howard SOLICIC Desk Officer; and Melissa Dalton, OSD Lebanon Desk Officer. Also in attendance were Ambassador Sison; visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs David Hale and Defense Attache Lieutenant Colonel David Alley.

UNITY OF THE ARMY IS PARAMOUNT
WE MUST ALSO PRESERVE STABILITY

3. (C) Masri opened the meeting by characterizing the many USG delegations that have visited Lebanon as confirmation to him that the United States is concerned about Lebanon. "Not only concern, but also importance," replied the Ambassador. "We want to keep the unity of the Army," said Masri, "This is our main job. We will do our best to preserve stability."

4. (C) General Masri then recounted the recent problems in Tripoli, the Beka'a, and in Beirut as examples of the many security problems facing Lebanon. In his estimation, these problems are predominantly political and require political solutions. During the time that politicians search for a political solution, the Army must remain united so that it will be available to the state once the political compromises have been made. "We interfere in situations to try and calm them down," said Masri, "but everyone knows we have more missions than troops we need (to perform these missions)."

THE LAF'S ROLE DURING THE ELECTIONS IS
TO SUPPORT THE INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES

5. (C) Masri told us that he sees the current violence as a type of communication system. "I think a lot of people are sending messages related to the 2009 elections," he said. Masri told us that some people blame the current state of unrest on security problems, but the real reason for the

unrest is an unstable political situation.

16. (C) Masri expects this type of unrest to continue into the elections next year. Regarding the LAF's role in securing the elections, Masri said, "we work with the ISF. Elections are the responsibility of the ISF, not the LAF. We can only assist them." Even with this clear division of responsibility, Masri does not think that the ISF will be

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capable of securing the elections by themselves. "We will be there ready to help them," said Masri. Masri said that the LAF could not allow anything to happen in the security arena to alter the electoral outcome. On an almost cautionary note, Masri reminded us, "maybe the political allies will change between now and the elections." (Comment: Masri is a Druze officer who has direct links to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. End Comment.) ASD Long offered DoD assistance to the LAF in the form of "lessons learned" from DoD's experiences with election security in other parts of the world.

ISF IS HALF THE SIZE OF THE ARMY
BUT THEY ARE NOT DOING VERY MUCH

17. (C) It was evident that Masri was taking pains to curb his criticism of the ISF. Masri told us that the ISF was having great difficulties because they have a different composition, a clear reference to the oft-heard refrain that the ISF is Sunni-dominated. Masri said that the LAF is working with the ISF on many projects throughout the country, such as the Common Border Force on the northern border with Syria as well as joint security operations in Tripoli. Even so, the majority of Lebanese still do not accept the ISF and look to the LAF for protection. For this reason, Masri told us it is imperative to bolster the Army's capabilities. At the same time, Masri feels that it is important to show that the ISF works for the benefit of all Lebanese.

18. (C) Masri told us that the ISF currently has 23,000 personnel, a little less than half the number of LAF troops. Even with this great number, Masri assessed that the ISF is doing little saying, "they do nothing compared to LAF missions." Masri assured us that the LAF is trying to work side by side with the ISF, and that the ISF Commander Major General Ashraf Rifi is a good man, but the ISF is not getting a good return on its investment because of its confessional make up. "Their institution needs to build some credibility," said Masri.

NEW LEBANESE SPECIAL OPERATIONS
COMMAND STILL UNDER FORMATION

10. (C) General Masri told us that the new Lebanese Special Operations Command (LSOC) is still in its early stages of development. The commander, Brigadier General Charbel Peghali, has been in place for several months now and has started identifying possible future staff members. Masri says that the LSOC needs much preparation and planning as well as a location for the staff to work.

WE NEED NEW EQUIPMENT NOW
WE CANNOT WAIT UNTIL THE NEXT CRISIS

11. (C) Masri then turned to the subject of equipment for the LAF. He tied his equipment requests to specific missions that he has to accomplish on the ground. He is concerned about any mission that may present itself unexpectedly, such as another Nahr Al Bared Palestinian refugee camp scenario. This time, Masri fears, it could be the Ain Al Hilweh camp that is a problem. During this same period, the ever-closing elections are going to create additional missions that are unforeseen at this time. It is for this reason that Masri made his plea for immediate assistance saying, "we cannot continue like this."

12. (C) ASD Long told MG Masri that MG Allardice would review the LAF's priorities and timelines for equipment fielding and training. Additionally, he would focus on planning for training to commence in January 2009. When asked of his plan

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included appropriate consideration for the elections, Masri said that, "it is not important to look through the lens of the elections. Only look at what we need to do our security job."

ATTACK HELICOPTERS ARE OUR NUMBER
ONE PRIORITY FOR THE ARMY

13. (C) In order to meet their security requirements, Masri told us that the LAF's number one equipment priority was "fighting helicopters," by which he meant attack helicopters. Masri said he needed attack helicopters to move quickly

around the country to face threats in the camps and to face the militias. Masri was quick to add that the LAF is not thinking of threats from "outside of its borders" when making this request, a clear reference to Israel. Masri told us that the LAF is only requesting the minimal equipment, with the minimal capability, to accomplish its assigned missions. "What we ask for are things to protect ourselves inside the country, against militias inside Lebanon, and terrorists, or if someone were to cross our borders," said Masri. In any case, Masri believes that these things are needed no matter if there are elections or not. "We need this equipment to face this armed group Hizballah. Else, we cannot face them."

WE HAVE HEARD MUCH DISCUSSION
BUT SEE LITTLE ACTION ON HELOS

¶14. (C) Masri, usually one for great understatement, leaned forward, took a deep breath, and said, "Speaking frankly to you from my heart, until now, the opposition tells us we don't receive anything for our pro-American stance except promises." Masri told ASD Long that the LAF must be able to show this opposition that their decision to go with the United States was the correct decision. Masri said, "We have to be able to show them something. Attack helicopters are a priority for us. We cannot wait. We have to move quickly. Tell us if the answer is 'no' from the U.S. so we can ask another country." Masri cited Nahr Al Barid as his principal example of fighting breaking out suddenly, and without warning.

WE COULD NOT HAVE WON AT BARID
WITHOUT THE HELP OF THE UNITED STATES

¶15. (S/NF) Masri recounted the initial days of the struggle at Nahr Al Barid for ASD Long, saying that the LAF could not have won without the intelligence and ammunition assistance from the United States. "Fatah al Islam fought us for three months without one case of resupply. We could only fight for fifteen days without your help," said Masri. Again, Masri insisted that the LAF cannot wait for events to happen before the U.S. takes action. "We ask for the least amount of things that we need. You cannot recognize an army that has no fighting helicopters and no tanks," said Masri.

MANY OTHER COUNTRIES ARE MAKING OFFERS
BUT WE PREFER TO STAY WITH THE USA

¶16. (C) Masri also took some time to discuss assistance proposals from other countries. Masri was quick to point out that these proposals were for "free" or "donated" equipment. Masri told ASD Long that he has repeatedly refused these offers because the LAF wants to stay aligned with the U.S. "We will have a big problem if we reject them and don't get things from you," said Masri.

¶17. (C) Masri told ASD Long that the current training and
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equipping plan is good, and that the LAF is quite satisfied with the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Masri said he is convinced that these tracks are crucial for the relationship, but he also warned that there were others who needed to be convinced. "We have received track pads for our armored personnel carriers, some spare parts, and some ammunition, but not much else. Announcement of fighting helicopters would change the mood in Lebanon," said Masri.

IF THE UNITED STATES CANNOT
AFFORD TO HELP US, WHO CAN?

¶18. (C) Masri rhetorically asked, "If you cannot afford to help us with attack helicopters, who can?" Masri cited the United Arab Emirates' donation of light attack Gazelle helicopters that had precision missiles. Masri recounted how they arrived during the Nahr Al Bared conflict and were immediately presaged into service in close combat operations. "Only the helicopters can change the mood of the war. This is why we emphasize attack helicopters," said Masri.

¶19. (C) According to Masri, Fatah al-Islam knew it was in trouble when the LAF started dropping bombs from jerry-rigged UH-1 helicopters that were never designed to drop bombs. "What shall we use when we have to move to Ain Al Hilweh?" asked Masri. To emphasize this point, Masri said, "If Ain Al Hilweh happened tomorrow, we are not ready. Anything that happens there will not stay in the camp."

¶20. (C) Assistant Secretary Long has cleared this cable.
SISON